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Hill Probes Of NSC Planned

Arms Deal With Iran Seen as Attempt to Circumvent Congress

By Walter Pincus
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House and Senate leaders said yesterday that several committees will investigate whether the National Security Council has been used to circumvent Congress, the Pentagon and the State Department in arranging for arms to be shipped to Iran in exchange for American hostages.

The inquiries, congressional sources said, are expected to go beyond the Iranian operation to the role of the NSC in supplying arms to the rebels in Nicaragua, in the disinformation campaign against Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, and in President Reagan's proposal at Reykjavik to eliminate all ballistic missiles over 10 years.

Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, may hold hearings as early as December, one source said. Senate hearings are not likely to begin before the 100th Congress convenes in January, when the Senate will be controlled by Democrats.

Congressional sources said investigations are to be scheduled by the House and Senate intelligence panels, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Several key congressional leaders added their voices yesterday to mounting criticism over possible damage to U.S. foreign policy by the secret White House arms-for-hostages program, which sources said was run by the NSC and its staff despite objections from the secretaries of state and defense.

Senate Minority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) said on NBC News' "Meet the Press" that the White House was "attempting to circumvent the Congress" by using the NSC and that "perhaps the national security adviser should be one of those officers who have to have Senate confirmation."

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said on CBS News' "Face the Nation" that "I think what you have is a situation in the White House where . . . they have gotten pretty excited about running their own CIA, State Department, Defense Department out of the White House without anybody looking over their shoulder."

Reagan's national security adviser, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, who has directed the covert approaches to Tehran for the past year, was quoted as saying that the arms deals developed "tangentially" to a plan to open broader contacts with Iranians inside and outside the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.), chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, said Poindexter told him Saturday night in a phone conversation that White House officials "were exploring options with different Iranian groups" and the arms arrangement developed "subsidiary" to that effort.

Lugar, appearing on ABC News' "This Week with David Brinkley," said he had talked with Secretary of State George P. Shultz on Saturday, and although the secretary "does not know a great deal about the events," Lugar said he does not expect Shultz to resign over the issue. Lugar described news stories about the possibility of Shultz leaving the government as "purely press speculation attempting to drive this story onward a few notches."

Lugar said Shultz reported that he was "not conversant" with the details of the hostage-arms program, and that some "aspects and operations" of the program "obviously apparently were" withheld from him.

Lugar's conversations with Shultz and Poindexter left "a lot of questions unanswered," one congressional source said.

Sources said yesterday that NSC officials kept from Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger the operational information about the program to send arms through Israel to Iran in return for help in the release of Americans in Lebanon held by the pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad.

The covert program ran counter to the Reagan administration's public policy, promoted primarily by Shultz, that the United States would not reward terrorists and was working to halt all arms shipments to Iran.

Shultz and Weinberger expressed their objections directly to Reagan in a January White House meeting. At that time, Reagan brought the arms shipments to a temporary halt, although the program had resulted in the September 1985 release of the Rev. Benjamin Weir.

After several months, during which hostage families in the United States put increasing public pressure on the president, the program was begun again at Reagan's direction, sources said. But Shultz and Weinberger were not fully apprised of its details.

Sources said neither Shultz nor Weinberger were informed in advance about former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane's trip to Tehran this fall.

White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan, in an interview on "John McLaughlin, One on One," taped Friday and broadcast yesterday, said, "I'll assure you that we're not breaking any laws, we're not doing anything illegal or immoral. And I think that when we can tell the story, the American public will appreciate the efforts of this president to get American hostages released."

Also defending the White House actions, Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), a member of the Senate intelligence panel who said he knew "some of the facts," said on "Face the Nation" that the wider "goal here is to try to bring about a more moderate group leadership in Iran."

But Rep. Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.), chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, said Congress must ask, "Do we want foreign policy run out of the White House," which is "not properly staffed . . . and has created some incredible problems for us?"

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Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), said Congress will question "the decision-making process in this administration." Saying the Iranian program cut out Congress, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Defense and State departments, Nunn asked, "Who's making the decisions?"

One government official who has worked with the NSC in this and past administrations said yesterday that council officials and staff do not try to work out disagreements. Rather, they "cut out" people who object and "go their own way," he said.

The official said there were no consultations within the government on the dangers of attempting to make secret contact with moderate Iranians and "certainly nothing said about sending McFarlane to Tehran. We would have warned against that," he added.

Former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger, appearing on the ABC program, said he disagreed with the arms-for-hostages program but that Reagan's decision to go ahead with it despite the dissent of two top Cabinet members was not "procedurally outrageous."

Kissinger said that improving relations with Iran "as a strategic move is desirable," but "an arms trade for hostages . . . makes it more likely that other hostages are going to be taken."

Kissinger said the president's "anguish" over the plight of the hostages probably resulted in his decision to conduct a secret policy at the same time Reagan, Shultz and the rest of the administration were publicly pressuring allies to follow another policy.

"My impression," Kissinger said, "is that the president has to meet with hostage families—that the president is a compassionate man who is deeply concerned about the suffering of the victims."

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